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AUTHOR Conti, Gary J.; Fellenz, Robert A.
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ABSTRACT

Discussion groups are an excellent instructional strategy for exploring ideas, disclosing views on issues, and uncovering learning needs. Their strength lies in that they draw upon the experiences and values of the group members. They are most successful when structured in such a way that they encourage all members to contribute freely to the discussion. Agree-disagree statements with expanding groups provide a mechanism for stimulating this participation in a nonthreatening manner. Agree-disagree statements are a list of approximately 10 statements about issues of concern to the group. In order to spark discussion, the statements should be written in such a way that a few words will elicit divergent opinions concerning the concept in the statement. To use agree-disagree statements, each person is provided the list and given a few minutes to reflect on the statements. Participants decide if they agree or disagree with each statement and record their responses. Once individual decisions are made, more stimulating discussions can be fostered with the use of expanding groups. This technique uses repeated groups of ever-increasing size to seek group consensus on the best answer for each item in the agree-disagree list. This technique allows for capitalizing on group strengths, as well as changing group dynamics. A sample of 10 agree-disagree statements on the education of adults is provided. (KC)

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FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

STIMULATING DISCUSSIONS WITH AGREE-DISAGREE STATEMENTS AND EXPANDING GROUPS

Gary J. Conti
Robert A. Fellenz

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Introduction

Discussion groups are an excellent instructional strategy for exploring ideas, disclosing views on issues, and uncovering learning needs. Through focussed discussions, ideas can be analyzed at the highest thought levels, implications can be drawn, and alternatives postulated. During the discussion, participants share their feelings with the group. As they build arguments and express their beliefs, group members can understand how they think. Such discussions can elicit the assumptions participants' hold concerning a topic, indicate what they know about the topic, and reveal areas of further needed learning. Because discussions are so powerful, they can be incorporated into the classroom as a teaching strategy, or they can be used as a means to organize staff development activities which call for input from the staff.

Agree-Disagree Statements

While discussions have great potential, they can also be threatening, easily dominated by a few members, and downright dull. How then can one make discussion groups democratic, focussed, and stimulating? One technique to do this is to use agree-disagree statements. Agree-disagree statements are simply a list of approximately 10 statements about issues of concern to the group. The list should contain statements about the major concepts related to the issue. In order to spark discussion, the statements

GARY J. CONTI is an associate professor of adult education at the University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia. Robert A. Fellenz is a professor of adult education at Montana State University, Bozeman, Montana.

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should be written in such a way that a few words will elicit divergent opinions concerning the concept in the statement. One or two keywords in the statement should move the sentence from the realm of accepted fact into that of an opinion. When these statements are used, participants will want to change these words, and much discussion among the participants will revolve around the interpretation of these words. Thus, the object is to write statements upon which no one can easily agree.

The sample set of agree-disagree statements can be used in a staff development exercise with adult basic education teachers to discuss their beliefs about adult education. Keywords like "a liberal use" (Item 6), "sometimes necessary" (Item 7), and "a little pressure" (Item 10) guarantee that the participants must supply their own meaning and values to the statement. Similar statements can be constructed for classroom use with students. They can be used with controversial issues in any area; possible uses include the various interpretations of literature, the merits of political candidates and issues, the desirable applications of scientific knowledge, the interpretation of historical events, appropriate health practices, or the purposes of education.

To use agree-disagree statements, each person is provided the list and given a few minutes to reflect on the statements. Participants decide if they agree or disagree with the statement; they must take a stand on each statement and record it on their sheet.

Expanding Groups

Once individual decisions are make, the group leader can organize the group in various ways. While it is possible to have a large group discussion at this point with the individual's recorded opinions as a starting point, more stimulating discussions can be fostered with the use of expanding groups. This technique uses repeated groups of ever increasing size to seek group consensus on the best answer for each item in the agree-disagree list.

With expanding groups, groups start with a small number and are increased in size with each round of the activity. For example, groups may initially have only two members for the first round; after the first round of discussions, the groups can be expanded to four by combining two groups. In the next round, they may be doubled to eight. This expansion may be continued until there is only one group which contains all class members.

AGREE-DISAGREE STATEMENTS ON THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS

Directions: Write "A" before the statements with which you agree; write "D" before those with which you disagree.

_____1. Sometimes it is necessary to change people in the direction you yourself think is right even when they object.

_____2. The major objective of an Educational Administrator should be to promote the effectiveness of the interaction between teachers and learners.

_____3. Most adults know what they need although they may not always be willing to admit what these needs are.

_____4. Most teachers of adults should be less concerned with content and more concerned with making the adult feel comfortable in the learning situation.

_____5. The average adult student wants to be responsible for his/her own learning.

_____6. A liberal use of audio visuals provides the variation needed in an adult learning situation.

_____7. It is sometimes necessary to ignore the feelings of others in order to reach a group decision.

_____8. In adult education, the means are as important as the ends.

_____9. Steady employment, good physical working conditions, a pension, and other security benefits are still stronger motivators to most people than such things as feeling the job is important, feeling respected as a person, and knowing what is going on in the organization.

____10. A little pressure is a good and necessary thing in any learning situation.

- The expanding group strategy capitalizes on the strengths of various group sizes and allows for a change in the internal dynamics of a group. The intimacy of very small groups is utilized at the beginning of the activity for the initial input of ideas. As the groups expand, ideas can be subjected to further analysis and development. However, since the ideas that are carried forward take on a group identity, the tendency is lessened for an individual to be personally defensive of an idea. As the group expands, isolated ideas can be categorized and organized into broader concepts. This can lead to either the further development of relevant ideas or the rejection of irrelevant ideas.

The expansion of the group also allows for a change in the dynamics within a group. Those supportive of a minority idea within a small group may find allies for this idea in the expanded group. Ideas which were rejected in one small group may be resurrected and further developed in a larger group. Group members, who were reluctant to reject a colleagues ideas in a small group because of the personal identity the idea has with its original generation, may be more critical of ongoing ideas in a larger group. The expansion process thus not only allows ideas to seek the highest possible level of development and support, but it also allows individual members to vary their participation level in accordance with the group size with which they are most comfortable.

The final rounds of the expansion process have the potential of suffering from repetition and unmanageable group size. If groups start with two members and are doubled, by the third round they contain eight members and are at the maximum for effective group interaction. Further expansion would have group sizes from 16 to 32. Since ideas have been closely scrutinized and many alliances formed by the third round, subsequent rounds with larger groups frequently become a reporting episode with further actions decided by structured voting procedures rather than by in-depth discussion.

Conclusion

Discussion groups are not used to teach facts. Instead, they are used to analyze and evaluate ideas. Their strength lies in that they draw upon the experiences and values of the group members. They are most successful when structured in such a way that they encourage all members to freely contribute to the discussion. Agree-disagree statements with expanding groups provide a mechanism for stimulating this participation in a nonthreatening manner.